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LEGISLATIVE HEARING HIGHLIGHTS CALIFORNIA'S FOSTER CARE IMPROVEMENTS

Reforms Benefit Children and Families

Sacramento, CA – Key reforms have led to significant improvements to California's foster care system, child welfare administrators and a leading researcher today told state lawmakers at a legislative hearing focusing on the needs of foster children.

"We are encouraged by early progress, but our work to protect abused and neglected children entrusted to our care is ongoing," said Mary Ault, deputy director of Children and Family Services, California Department of Social Services (CDSS). "The Administration is committed to building upon the progress we are making to improve services to children and families, promote permanent homes and family connections and support youth as they become independent adults." Last year, the Governor signed a bipartisan package of legislation to improve outcomes for families and children.

A key tool in the state's effort to improve outcomes for children and youth in foster care is the Outcomes and Accountability System created by Assembly Bill 636 (Steinberg), which enables the state to track and monitor the progress of children in foster care. A hallmark of this new system is its transparency of information and community involvement in identifying local needs and solutions. Reports are posted on CDSS' Web site (www.cdss.ca.gov) as well as county Web sites.

"Data over the last two years provide real information on the progress that California is making in improving outcomes for children," said Dr. Barbara Needell, principal investigator at the Center for Social Services Research, University of California, Berkeley, which is responsible for much of the data analysis in California. "Progress over the past two years is nothing short of astounding. California is clearly moving in the right direction."

Under the Outcomes and Accountability System, U.C. Berkeley tracks more than 13 indicators that measure whether outcomes are improving for children and youth in the state's child welfare services system. California is showing gains in all of these areas, including:

- Adoption of children within two years of entering foster care is up 29.4 percent.
- Rates for children re-entering the child welfare system after they have been reunified with their families are down 6.7 percent.
- The likelihood of children experiencing a recurrence of abuse or neglect within the foster care system is down 4.5 percent.
- Rates for children experiencing less than three placements in foster care are up 3.5 percent.
- Placement of children with their siblings is up 2.8 percent.

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Dr. Needell also testified about the proper interpretation and use of new child welfare outcome data, which is being collected for the first time, and must be understood in both its complexity and its inter-relatedness. She urged special caution in drawing cross-county comparisons, which can lead be misleading.

Also discussed at Tuesday's hearing was the level of collaboration now occurring between state, county and community partners, including philanthropy, which has brought focused investments to support statewide improvements. State and county administrators widely acknowledged that public-private collaboration is helping to support California's improved performance and that it will remain an important component of future progress.

"Philanthropy and community partners statewide have made today's progress possible," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the County Welfare Directors Association of California. "Foundations have invested more than \$10 million over the past three years in initiatives that have inspired local system improvements. Joined at the local level by community-based organizations that are critical to this work, together we are working to improve outcomes for children whose families are unable to care for them."

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